

East Texas Historical Journal

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 6

2-1964

Historical Aspects of Linguistic Research in East Texas

Fred A. Tarpley

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Tarpley, Fred A. (1964) "Historical Aspects of Linguistic Research in East Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol2/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF LINGUISTIC RESEARCH IN EAST TEXAS

FRED A. TARPLEY

For the past five years, I have been asking East Texans what they call illegitimate children, the part of the day just before supper, worthless dogs, and food made from hogs' intestines.

Wherever I travel I make inquiry about epitaphs in local cemeteries and origins of such geographical names as Mud Dig, Poetry, Sweat Box, Scrouge Out, Elysian Fields, and Shake Rag. These questions are all part of grass roots research done by linguists who are interested in regional language patterns.

What the natives call illegitimate children, worthless dogs, and other lexical concepts will determine the local spoken dialect. How epitaphs have been composed and spelled on tombstones from one generation to the next will reflect the steady evolution of the written language. Origins of map names for towns, streams, hills, and streets will reveal significant information about pioneer family names, foreign language influence, natural features of the land, and word corruptions.

In each of these three fields of linguistic research—regional dialect, cemetery epitaphs, and geographical place names—I have been unable to confine my work or my interest strictly to the discipline of language study. Often I have trespassed with delight and reward into the domain of history, folklore, sociology, economics, geography, religion, architecture, psychology, and related fields.

The purpose of the following discussion is to outline certain historical aspects that cannot and should not be avoided when linguistic research is conducted in East Texas.

My first field of linguistic research—regional dialect—resulted in a doctoral dissertation at Louisiana State University entitled *A Word Atlas of Northeast Texas*. For this study, I interviewed two hundred native informants in twenty-six counties in the northeast corner of Texas and recorded their answers to 127 dialect questions. This area covers the counties bounded on the north by Red River, the east by Arkansas and Louisiana, the west by a line halfway between Dallas and Fort Worth, and the south by an arbitrary line including Ellis, Kaufman, Van Zandt, Smith, Gregg, and Harrison Counties.

A major chapter in the dialect study was devoted to a consideration of the people and historical background of Northeast Texas. The most valuable single volume written about the settlement of the area is an unpublished doctoral dissertation at the University of Texas by Rex W. Strickland, entitled *Anglo-American Activities in Northeastern Texas, 1803-45*. Professor Strickland, a native of Fannin County, now teaches history at Texas Western College.

The earliest recorded white settlement in Northeast Texas is reported by H. Yoakum in his *History of Texas*, published in 1856. According to Yoakum, a trading-company under the direction of M. Francois Hervey came from Natchitoches, Louisiana, in 1750 to settle eventually in an ancient Caddo village on the Red River in what is now Red River County. Several French families prospered there, growing corn, tobacco, and garden vegetables. But in 1770 after Louisiana had passed into the hands of Spain and no attention was paid to the French settlers on the upper Red River, the colony returned to the vicinity of Natchitoches to provide educational and social benefits for the children.

After 1770, Northeast Texas was left to roving Indian tribes and to white fugitives from justice. A spur of Trammel's Trace was laid out by horse thieves who needed a route to Nacogdoches to sell animals stolen in Missouri. In 1815 law-abiding settlers began to arrive at Pecan Point, near the buffalo crossing on the Red River in present-day Red River County. This important center of early settlement in Northeast Texas was the destination of many Southern mountaineers, whose boats carried them down the Cumberland River to its mouth, down the Ohio to the Mississippi, to the mouth of the Red River and then to Natchitoches and beyond.

For many years, inhabitants of the Red River settlements were perplexed by the anomalous legal status. They regarded themselves as citizens of the United States, and they were justified in this claim because of the ill-defined boundary line between Spanish Texas and the American territory of Arkansas. At the same time, had the area south of Red River actually been considered within the boundaries of the United States, the residents were encroaching upon unsurveyed public domain.

The Texas Revolution of 1836 strangely enough secured the independence of Northeast Texas, not from Mexico, but from the United States. Had the battle of San Jacinto been lost, the Americans would almost certainly have held on to Miller County, Arkansas, but with San Jacinto won, westerners let the long disputed area between the Red River and the Sabine slip by default into the Republic of Texas.

A study of population sources also casts light on dialects in Northeast Texas. The states which sent early settlers into East Texas may be discovered in the tables of statistics prepared by Barnes F. Lathrop in his valuable study, *Migration into East Texas, 1835-1860*. It may be concluded from Mr. Lathrop's statistics, taken from ante-bellum census records, that the typical Northeast Texan came from English and Scotch-Irish stock, in greatest numbers from Southern mountain areas and in second greatest numbers from Southern plantation areas.

In the case of my study, the historian's reports on migrations were very helpful in suggesting the kinds of dialects that settlers would have brought into the area with them. When records of the former homes of immigrants are not available, the results of the dialect study can often lead the historian to a hypothesis regarding migrations by tracing the dialects found in an area to their geographical sources. Thus history and dialectology are closely allied.

In my *Word Atlas of Northeast Texas*, I was able to draw several major conclusions, some of them with historical implications:

The first conclusion is that the vocabulary within the region of Northeast Texas is highly homogeneous. Geographical factors are less important in word distribution than the age, sex, and education of the native speaker and the size of the community in which he lives.

Significant geographical distribution of Northeast Texas vocabulary is summarized in the following list:

1. Artificial watering place for livestock
 - tank (western counties; among younger informants)
 - pool (central counties)
 - pond (eastern counties; especially southeastern area)
2. Insect with a double set of transparent wings seen flying over water
 - dragon fly (standard educated usage)
 - snake doctor
 - mosquito hawk (eastern counties)
 - skiter hawk (eastern counties)
3. Large sack made of burlap
 - tow sack
 - croker sack (southeastern counties)
4. Clavicle of chicken that children play a game with
 - pulley bone
 - wishbone (southeastern counties)
5. Milk that is beginning to turn sour
 - blinky
 - blue john (southeastern counties)
 - blinky john (Upshur County)
6. A small scarlet insect that bores into the skin
 - chigger
 - redbug (eastern counties)
7. Bird that makes holes in trees with its bill
 - peckerwood, red head (eastern counties)
 - woodpecker
8. Motherless calf
 - maverick (western counties)
 - orphan
9. Block of land in the center of a business district
 - square
 - plaza (Lamar County and adjoining area)
10. Little boy's weapon made of rubber strips on a forked stick
 - sling shot or nigger shooter
 - nigger flipper, bean flip (Red River County)
 - nigger killer (eastern Hopkins County, western Titus County)

Second, both the vocabulary and pronunciation of Northeast Texans may be closely aligned with Southern mountain speech more than with any other dialect area in the Eastern United States.

Third, special patterns of vocabulary and pronunciation separate the southeastern corner of Northeast Texas from the rest of the region and indicate that Marion, Harrison, and adjoining counties have more Southern Plantation qualities than the other counties.

Fourth, not until linguistic atlases have been made available for all parts of the United States will the complete dialectal position of Northeast Texas be known.

My second field of linguistic research is cemetery epitaphs. Too often cemeteries are neglected archives for local history, legends, superstitions, and folkways. Egyptian pyramids, Roman tombs, and American Indian burial mounds have proved invaluable in interpreting past civilizations; but beyond the listing of foreboding Puritan epitaphs in New England and the compiling of genealogies, few serious studies have been made of cemeteries in the United States.

Cemeteries are equally important in linguistic and literary research. The changing language may be detected in the grammatical usage and spelling carved into tombstones by other generations. Graveyard poets find their inspiration in country churchyards amid the melancholy of what Thomas Gray's fine "Elegy" calls the "uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture." Epitaphs form a part of our literature, and epitaph-writing has become the literary domain of the artless masses as well as master poets. In older cemeteries, epitaphs preserve in stone the primary sources of folk fact and sentiment. In gestures of temporary immortality, chiseled letters spell out declarations of faith, love, and sorrow; favorite quotations; original verse; epigrams; and catalogs of terrestrial achievements and celestial goals. Cemetery architecture and burial customs mirror the artistic, social and religious patterns of the locality. Legends and superstitions that become the lore of the living are often originated and perpetuated in our communities of the dead.

Cemetery art recently became fashionable when a Ford Foundation grant was given two young artists who have transferred Early American stone sculpture from tombstones by rubbing a pencil over rice paper placed against the stone.

In East Texas, vague variations of a graveyard legend border between history and folk literature. Most tellings of the story agree that a woman sticks a sharp object—usually a knife—into a grave at night and in so doing catches her garment and dies of fright. At this point the similarities end. I first heard the story from my high school English teacher in Bowie County who said she had been told of a girl in her hometown many years before who had pierced the edge of her apron while sticking her late boyfriend's favorite jack knife into his grave. According to the version handed down to some of my own students, a girl spending the night with a girl friend was dared to go to a nearby cemetery and stick a pitchfork into a fresh grave. One of the prongs caught her gown as she plunged the fork into the grave, and she died of fright.

The account given by Louise Hathcock in her book, *Legends of East Texas*, sets the story on a Colonel Stuart's plantation in southeastern Panola County during the Civil War. After the colonel's fourteen-year-old son died, the Negroes refused to plow within a half-mile radius of the cemetery where he was buried because they had seen ghosts hovering about his grave in the moonlight. The colonel offered a \$5 goldpiece to Aunt Dorah, his late son's colored nurse, if she would take a butcher knife from her kitchen and drive it into the grave as proof she had visited the cemetery without fear during the night. When she was found dead at the grave the next morning, the colonel explained to the Negroes that she had probably driven the knife through her apron and trying to leave, thought a ghost was reaching for her from the grave. He said their ghost was only moonlight on the cobwebs.

Grammarians who take up epitaph reading are apt to be haunted by the gross errors they find carved permanently in stone. An English professor at East Texas State College is often tempted to red pencil the grammatical flaws on the tombstone of her great-grandparents. Their epitaph reads:

Tis but the caskets that lies here

The gems that filled them sparkles yet

What appears at first glance to be a mistake may actually be the historically standard usage for another generation. "Here *lies* the *remains* . . ." gives a first impression of having an error in verb agreement, but consistent use of "remains" as a singular noun will be found in 19th century epitaphs, indicating this was considered correct usage at that time. Changes in spelling may also be observed, as in *council*, the spelling of a century ago for the word we now spell *counsel*.

Transient styles in Christian names may be reviewed in the epitaphs of different generations. Would any space-age East Texas parents dare give their offspring any of the following names of the past century: Temperance, Saphronia, Arminta, Cicero, Ucala, Narcissus, Ludie, Electra, Lular, Obediah, Singletary, or Edmonia?

A historical oddity in the Klondike community graveyard in Delta County is a tombstone facing westward. A local monument dealer recalls this is the grave of a man who killed his brother, was hanged, and denied the Christian tradition of being buried looking toward the east. This added punishment for condemned men seems to have been widespread.

The tradition, "Do not speak evil of the dead," is sometimes exaggerated in East Texas cemeteries. A striking example of kind words for the deceased may be seen at the grave of Bonnie Parker, the noted gun moll of Clyde Barrow during the 1930's. Their days of crime ended violently in an ambush in northern Louisiana. Friends laid Bonnie to rest near Dallas in Fishtrap Cemetery, a burial ground first used by citizens of LaReunion, a short-lived utopian colony of Frenchmen settled in 1855. The gun moll's epitaph reads: "The life she lived will make this world better off."

When the owner of a grist mill died in Cooper, Texas, his family closed the business and used the mill stone to mark his grave.

Stories of lost cemeteries abound in Northeast Texas where some farmers still avoid plowing near groves of bois d'arc trees. According to tradition, bois d'arc trees were often planted as living fences encircling now forgotten graveyards.

In Southeast Texas and Southern Louisiana, tombstones frequently disappear as they sink into the soggy ground, but in East Texas, I discovered one that disappeared under other circumstances. A two-hour search for an original epitaph written by an eccentric citizen in a Northeast Texas town puzzled my guides who swore they had seen the stone not long before. The mystery of the missing monument was solved by the local marble dealer who remembered he had repossessed it and sandblasted the original verse after the family got behind in payments. This shrewd businessman outlined for me his trade-in plan, whereby old tombstones are accepted as down payments for new ones. He said the national trend in memorials is away from elaborate stones and epitaphs. "I used to put anything my customers wanted on the stones for free," he explained, "but some of 'em wanted the whole *Dallas News* put on, so I started charging fifty cents a letter, and that discouraged 'em."

In Farmersville is the grave of Sam Harris, known as the world's heaviest man, who weighed 691 pounds when he died of pneumonia in October, 1924, after swimming across a lake in Ballinger. One hundred miles east of Farmersville in Mt. Pleasant is the grave of Colonel Henry C. Thruston, whose height of 7 feet, 7½ inches gave him claim to the title of tallest man in the United States.

This sampling of my experiences growing out of epitaph collecting suggests the unclaimed wealth of history and folklore in the stone archives of East Texas cemeteries. A stroll through a graveyard or a chat with a caretaker in any part of the United States may introduce us to material available from no other source. The cemetery of the future, we are told, will bear the stamp of perpetually-endowed conformity and will be less colorful, but the cemetery of the past continues to be a neglected research center for linguists, historians, and folklorists.

My third field of linguistic interest in East Texas is geographical place names. From the types of names given may often be surmised the time of settlement and local characteristics of an earlier period.

With the help of students at East Texas State College, I have surveyed seventy-five Texas counties—most of them in East Texas—attempting to find the derivation of each geographical name. The basic list of names is taken from official county maps prepared by the Texas Highway Department.

The origins of East Texas place names may be conveniently sorted into nine categories, each of which reflects the history of the region.

In the first category are the names of people—either local citizens or non-local celebrities. Many local pioneer families, civic leaders, postmasters, railroad officials, ministers, and land developers have been honored by having places named for them.

In a second category are names referring to a geographic description

of the countryside, its terrain, vegetation, minerals, animals or some other characteristic. Some of the descriptions are objective as in Lone Oak, Caney Creek, Squash Hollow, Red Oak, Pecan Gap, Mesquite, Hick Grove, Sulphur Springs, East Mountain, and Dry Creek. Others are imaginatively subjective, as in Godly Prairie, Elysian Fields, Mount Joy, Good Springs, Mud Dig, Sweat Box, Paradise, and Mount Pleasant.

Names derived from nearby or distant places form a third category. Immigrants were especially fond of naming East Texas towns for former homes in other states or countries. You will find namesakes for Genoa, Italy, in Harris County; Kildare, Ireland, in Cass County; Manchester, England, in Red River County; Naples, Italy, in Morris County; Nome, Alaska, in Jefferson County; Paris, France, in Lamar County, and Malakoff, Russia, in Henderson County.

A fourth category of names may be traced to the Bible, to literature, or to mythology, as in Zion, Macedonia, Ebenezer, Mars Hill, and Ivanhoe.

Names attributed to foreign language influence constitute a fifth group. American Indians provided Kiomatia, Kickapoo Creek, Caddo Mills, Lake Tawakoni, Cherokee County, and Chicota. From French came LaReunion; from Spanish came Golondrina Creek and Ladonia.

A sixth source of names is the miscellaneous blending of two or more words; Texarkana combines the names of three adjoining states. Mabank in Kaufman County takes Ma- from Dodge Mason and -bank from Tom Eubanks, both early settlers. Enon in Upshur County represents the first letter in the last names of four settlers, Eason, McNight, Olive, and Norris. Talco was derived from the name of the Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana Candy Co.

Backward spellings fall into a seventh group, with Reklaw (Walker spelled backwards) in Cherokee County and Sacul (Lucas spelled backwards) in Nacogdoches County.

Misunderstandings and misreadings—an eighth type of derivation—are exemplified by Bogata in Red River County and Warsaw in Kaufman County. Bogata was named for Bogota, Colombia, but the illegible penmanship in the application to the postal department was interpreted as Bogata. The spelling remained Bogata, the pronunciation Bogota.

White men in Kaufman County heard Indians talking about a place, calling it what sounded like Warsaw, when the Indians were trying to pronounce *water*.

In the ninth and most fascinating group of name derivations are those related to events or anecdotes.

Jot 'em Down in Delta County was a name a traveling salesman—who was a Lum and Abner fan—gave to a community where a new general store was being built.

Scrouge Out in Fannin County was a name given first to a school then to the surrounding rural community because students who did not arrive early at school had to scrouge out a seat on the benches.

Razor in Lamar County was named for a popular brand of tobacco.

Alba in Wood County and Snow Hill in Morris County are names referring to the color white, because the communities were intended for whites only.

Redwater in Bowie County was first called Ingersoll, after the famous atheist, because there were so many ungodly people there. The residents of Ingersoll did not object to the name until they got religion during a great revival during the 1880's. Then they changed the name to Redwater, referring to the red clay coloring of the water.

Coffeeville in Upshur County was a name which originated when the Civil War produced a scarcity of coffee. Settlers began to use parched corn, okra and other substitutes. A merchant from this area went to Jefferson and brought back a supply of green coffee. Folks from miles around came to his store in the community, which became known as Coffeeville.

Ginger in Kaufman County was first named Spicer for the Spicer Tie Yard, but railroad officials were afraid of confusing the post office and the spur track stop. "If you insist on a spicy name," a Katy railroad official said, "why don't you name the place Ginger?" So they did.

Also in Kaufman County is Poetry, which was named not by a poet but by a stranger, for a malnourished dog he called poor Tray.

Hog Eye in Gregg County was named for a hog thief who had a good eye for pigs.

Into a tenth category must fall many names whose origins are unknown. Some of the explanations have been lost forever; others are yet to be found in county histories, newspapers, memoirs, or in interviews with oldtimers.

Sometimes more than one explanation will be given. Some folks in Shake Rag, a nickname for Pleasant Grove in Rusk County, say Shake Rag originated because wives signaled to their husbands to come to dinner by shaking an apron. Others say a teacher threatened to spank a student so hard he wouldn't have anything but rags to shake.

Of tremendous influence in providing and inspiring East Texas place names was the railroad, for wherever the railroad stopped, a new name was needed. The U. S. Postal Department also had a far reaching effect on name giving, because applications for post office names were rejected if another Texas town had already been given the same name.

In each of the categories of place name origins—as well as in investigations of cemetery epitaphs and regional dialect—the linguist will encounter fascinating segments of East Texas history.